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# Yoknapatawpha County, Wessex: An Analysis of the Progressive Ideals of William Faulkner and Thomas Hardy

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## **Abstract**

Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner's novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Unvanquished*, exhibit similar ideologies despite being years apart and existing thousands of miles away from each other. Both authors posit a dichotomy of an old culture against a new culture and, in doing so, show how ancient cultures are dying out as a result of changing times and modernization. Hardy, within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* through the characters of the countryside, showcases that ancient pagan ideals still have some small prominence within the rural culture. Yet, as new generations are born and older generations pass, the pagan traditions have steadily begun to die off. Similarly, in Faulkner's novel, the mannerisms of the "Old South" are shown to wane in their prominence as a result of the Civil War. Ironclad customs begin to melt away within Faulkner's novel, which is representative of Faulkner's own beliefs for the South as a place that is in dire need of social upheaval. Also, within their works, both authors utilize strong female characters, Tess Durbeyfield and Drusilla Hawk, who deliberately spurn their respective societies of rural Victorian England and post-Civil War Mississippi. The inclusion of prominent female characters that directly oppose traditions norms is deliberate by Hardy and Faulkner as they are utilizing the medium of literature as a way to voice their beliefs concerning social change. Hardy and Faulkner's novels, although about different times and locations, are similar in how they both champion progressive ideals regarding social change.

Keywords: Societal change, cultural norms,

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### **The First Section**

Thomas Hardy was an English novelist and poet born in 1840 to humble beginnings in a small hamlet near Dorset. Hardy was the son of a stonemason and lived in a thatched “mudwall” cottage until he moved to London as a young man (Millgate). Another writer, William Faulkner, was born in 1897 in Mississippi to similarly disparaged parents. Despite the immense geographical differences between the two, their works tap into similar veins concerning social topics of their particular periods and locations. Although over half a century separates their births and the entire Atlantic Ocean, the ideas each author makes are remarkably similar.

The most superficial detail that unites both Hardy and Faulkner’s works is how each author created microcosms in which many of their works take place; Faulkner with Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and Hardy’s Wessex. The basis of Yoknapatawpha County and Wessex stemmed from geographical areas that were familiar to the respective authors. The inspiration for Yoknapatawpha derived from Lafayette County, Mississippi, and Wessex deriving from multiple regions in Southern England. Although slightly trivial, acknowledgment of this comparison is the essential groundwork to the authors' juxtaposition in that the social and cultural elements of Yoknapatawpha County and Wessex are what intertwine the author's works.

Yoknapatawpha County, and its two primary towns, Jefferson and Frenchman’s Bend, and Wessex, with Marlott and Flintcomb-Ash, are rural locations with corresponding rural people who are accustomed to certain societal norms. In the novels, *The Unvanquished* by Faulkner and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Hardy, citizens of Yoknapatawpha County and Wessex experience distressing social change, and it is through this social change that the

characters must face that the authors' intentions and beliefs become prominent. Within both novels, the authors address the notions of women as counter-societal forces and raise a dichotomy of old ways of life against new ways of life.

Therefore, an argument can be made that Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are similar on the notion that they shed light on the oppressed roles of women and champion the subjugation of those roles as well as the highlight the strain between old-values and new ways of life. Furthermore, this claim is substantial because both authors confront modern ideas within their novels, but only one is considered a modernist by contemporary scholarship. Faulkner was a known modernist writer who wrote about and explored modernist ideals within his works. Still, Hardy was not regarded as modernist by scholarship, but rather that he suffered from "the ache of modernism," the sense that he, his works, and his ideas were the primer that allowed the modernist form of thought to emerge around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hardy 124).

### **The Second Section**

Within *The Unvanquished* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, there is an old way of life that lingers in the society, still having sway although its prime has passed. In the former, the old way of life is the culture of the "Old South," and within the latter, it is the remnants of paganism that permeate the people of rural Wessex. These constructs are coming to pass within their respective times and locations. Still, the authors make their points through excellent subtly that ideologies once holistically believed do not vanish in an instant. Instead, their power fades over time; this is the case of the "Old South" dogma during and after the American Civil War which Faulkner showcases with the character of Bayard Sartoris and his father, Coronel John Sartoris, in *The Unvanquished*.

Bayard Sartoris is the son of Coronel John Sartoris, a Coronel in the Confederate Army during the Civil War (Faulkner 56). Within the novel, Coronel Sartoris is representative of the “Old South” mentality, and Bayard’s embodies the transition from “Old South” to “New South.”

After Coronel Sartoris returns from the war, he refuses to allow for the Jefferson he once knew before the war to be subject to any cultural changes. Coronel Sartoris is steadfast in his segregated and prejudiced ways. Going as far as to murder two African-American election officials and commandeer the election himself and effectively take control of the election because he could not conceivably imagine an African-American person, a recently freed slave, to vote the same as a white man (207). Coronel Sartoris has not and is unwilling to accept the new ways of life that are developing around him. He is a representative of the “Old South” mentality, a mentality that proves to linger on long in the wake of the Civil War, as is evident by Faulkner’s other novels. The culture of the “Old South,” in Faulkner’s definition, was to uphold and champion a set of ideals that included honoring, and if need be, defending a woman, treating people of African descent unequally, putting constraints upon women to be married, to exact revenge upon those who offend your family, and to operate with a sense of decorum in everyday life.

Bayard differs from his father in his failure to fully embrace the “Old South” way of life as a mature young adult. After Bayard’s father is murder by an old business partner, B.J. Redman, the “Old South” mentality dictates that Bayard must face Redman and attempt to kill him as revenge for murdering his father. This social convention of acceptable murder is shown by certain characters that Bayard encounters on his journey to Redman’s office. When George Wyatt, a man who served under Cornel Sartoris, understands that Bayard does not intend on killing Redman and even refuses to carry a weapon, he replies, “in a whisper-thin with fury:

‘Who are you? Is your name Sartoris? By God, if you don’t kill him, I’m going to’” showing Wyatt’s utmost devotion to the “Old South” mentality (247).

For Bayard to not kill the man who slew his father is a definitive and conscious effort to break from the “Old South” mentality. In the Old South's customs, not avenging a loved one's death was morally impermissible and made the individual the subject of scorn to their peers. However, Bayard's unarmed stand against Redman is a definitive blow against an outdated mentality. A step in the direction of the future, the "New South," Bayard believes that there has been far too much killing that has transpired in the South and adding to that toll would not help them to rebuild; Bayard wants, "No bloody moon" to rise on Jefferson and by extension, the post-Civil War South (247).

Despite Faulkner’s blatant negative feelings towards the “Old South” mentality, the concept is still prominent throughout the books. It serves as the structural identity for certain characters, just as paganism still holds sway to characters within Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* despite Britain having been a Christian nation for hundreds of years. Paganism has strong ties with Nature, and the natural world holds a prominent role within Hardy’s novel. The association with nature is within Tess’s character; Tess represents the pagan world within the novel.

### **The Third Section**

The pagan glorification of the Sun is presented beautifully in the lines: “His [the Sun’s] present aspect... explained the old-time heliolatries in a moment. One could feel that a saner religion had never prevailed under the sky” (Hardy 86). Here, Hardy’s veneration for the Sun and how the beauty of the Sun’s light in this particular instance seemingly explains how paganism could exist is a powerful and striking line. Within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy

differs from Faulkner in that while Faulkner is critical of the old way of life within Yoknapatawpha County, Hardy endorses the old pagan way of life in Wessex. Both authors place a primary focus on the idea of a dying and emerging way culture within their novels, but how they view the new and old cultures differs.

Furthermore, within her paper, “Nature and Paganism in Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*,” Charlotte Bonica argues that, “Hardy may even be implying that, in comparison to Christianity, paganism, in whatever form, is nevertheless based on the soul premise that the natural world can function as a source of human value” (Bonica 851). Hardy advocates for a pagan worldview as opposed to an emerging viewpoint. Hardy is providing social commentary on the world around him by creating a novel with a dichotomy between the old, rural, pagan, quasi-feudal, and the new, urban, Christian, capitalist society of his time. Therefore, Hardy creates Tess as a pagan heroine and pits her against the coercive and capitalistic, Alec D’Urberville, and the feeble neopagan, Angel Clare.

Within the novel, Alec is a representation of the elite that have reaped the benefits of capitalism and utilizes this wealth to control Tess by gifting her family with a horse and toys for her siblings (Hardy 72). Alec himself was not descendant of a wealthy family; instead, he is the descendant of a moneylender who moved to the south of England and in attempt to add pomp and sophistication to his surname thought, “*D’Urberville* looked and sounded as well as any of them: and D’Urberville accordingly was annexed to his own name” (Hardy 39). Hardy’s vilification of Alec is to present those aligned with wealth and capitalism as a ravenous beast who prey upon the innocent pagan country folk, such as Tess.

Hardy’s intention of having readers dislike Angel Clare is due to the part that he attempts to be something that he is not. Clare’s disdain for Christianity has driven him to heterodoxy, and

more specifically: Neopaganism. Hardy discredits Clare's appropriation of rural paganism with his neopaganism. Readers are inclined to despise Clare after his treatment of Tess, how, "as soon as he realizes that Tess is not the goddess he has imagined her to be, the fragile construct of his Neopaganism collapses" (Bonica 861). Although not as heinous as Alec, Clare commits an evil against Tess that stems from his elitist background.

### **The Fourth Section**

Both Faulkner and Hardy's novels are comparable due to how the authors posit the characters in their novels, having influences from two cultures that influence their lives. Within *The Unvanquished*, the outdated ways of the "Old South" maintain their grasp on the people of Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner acknowledges the lingering cultural effects of the "Old South" but does not endorse them; instead, the hero of the story, Bayard Sartoris, deliberately breaks the "Old South" code as a representation of the direction the South should move. Hardy, differing from Faulkner, backs the old way of life within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy venerates rural paganism and admonishes those who represent an attack on that way of life. The authors can be tenuously tied together by their inclusion of past and present social customs, but how the pair characterize women in their novels is the most substantial comparison between Faulkner and Hardy.

Both Hardy and Faulkner have strong female characters within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Unvanquished*. Tess Durbeyfield is resilient despite her horrible treatment by men in Hardy's novel, and Drusilla Hawk exhibits strength by transgressing stereotypical gender roles in the southern United States. Both authors' inclusion of strong female characters is deliberate to highlight how the lens of the women was viewed during their specific periods and locations was changing. Faulkner was campaigning for how roles for women in the South should not be

inherently oppressive, and Hardy was trying to stress the idea of the “fallen women” should not be the reality.

The gross mistreatment of Tess is disgusting in the novel that bears her namesake. Alec drugs and rapes her, which leaves her a single mother and deep issues concerning trust and men (Hardy 74). The second man, Angel, she opens herself to leaves her and sails to Brazil upon finding out about her past (243). However, despite the blatant abuse by those who were to care for her, Tess is independent and strong. She provides for herself and her family in Marlott by working tirelessly doing manual labor. Tess’s independence makes her a strong female character within the novel. Twice she shoulders a massive mental burden and twice does she carry on unhindered by her past weight. By working at grueling physical jobs, Tess manages to hold her own in the world, despite being deserted twice by men who were presumed to provide for her.

Hardy’s entire novel is a riff upon the “fallen women” narrative that was popular within Victorian literature. A fallen woman was to be a warning to women against sexual promiscuity and followed the same predictable steps, those steps being: seduction, abandonment, pregnancy and birth, death of the child, and the subsequent death of the mother. Although these occur within *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, the passage of time between the death of Tess’s child, Sorrow, and Tess is significant. Although Tess is killed, she goes out on her terms. She has taken back her life from the man that robbed her of a normal countryside woman’s life. By stabbing Alec, she has exacted revenge upon the one who wronged her. This notion of revenge opposes the narrative of the “fallen woman” because, within that narrative, the woman is the one who receives punishment for her deviation from the norm, not the man. Tess’s life continues after the death of her son, which also spurns the cultural norm of her not following her son’s death closely with her own. Hardy characterized Tess as a resistance to the idea of the “fallen woman” by

having her overcome tremendous adversity by not letting her rape and pregnancy define her life, and Tess enact revenge on the person who supremely wronged her: Alec D'Urberville.

Alec is hardly the only man that Tess must endure within the novel, Angel Clare, and his desertion of her further allows for Tess's independence to grow. She works an arduous job on a rutabaga farm where she becomes physically and mentally conditioned to be resilient, as is evident in the passage: "But to stand working slowly in a field, and feel the creep of rain-water, first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front, and sides, and yet to work on... demands a distinct modicum of stoicism, even of valor" (286). Tess does not let Angel's absence have control over her life. Instead, she takes an active role in working.

### **The Fifth Section**

Hardy's characterization of Tess' refusal to be passive in her own life and taking action that rebuffed that customary role of a woman at the time parallels the character of Drusilla Hawk in *The Unvanquished*. Drusilla rejects the stereotypical role of a southern woman in multiple ways, but the most obvious would be that she ran off to fight with the Confederate Army. Scholar Diane Roberts describes Drusilla's character within her paper entitled: "A Precarious Pedestal: the Confederate Woman in Faulkner's *Unvanquished*." Concerning Drusilla, Roberts writes: "The Confederate Woman combines the images of the belle and warrior, Spartan Woman and Roman Matron... embodying the romantic, religious and political discourses of the Civil War" (Roberts 233). Drusilla further alienated herself from typical Southern womanhood to her mother's abhorrence by wearing pants, cutting her hair short, riding horses like a man, and carrying a pistol (Faulkner 87-88). Faulkner has characterized Drusilla as the polar opposite of the antebellum Southern woman consciously. Drusilla represents a hyper-New South form of a woman, and the conflict that arises as a result of the public's reaction towards her creates a stir

within the reader. The women of Jefferson are appalled at Drusilla's attempt to unsex herself and transition "from female to male" by rejecting the traditional role of a woman (Roberts 239).

Faulkner's purpose with the character of Drusilla is to show how the traditional concept of the Southern woman is oppressive and demeaning, and should not continue. Drusilla, unfortunately, serves as the sacrificial lamb for the advancement of women in the novel. Eventually, she is broken and forced to marry Coronel Sartoris and trades her pants for dresses (200-201). Faulkner's conceptualization of Drusilla is a female character that disrupts the societal norm by being a strong female character capable of fighting and working like a man. This subversion of gender roles of the period does not sit with the people of Jefferson. Throughout the text, Faulkner implies that Drusilla's character is the way of the future and that the public's reaction is a warning of how people should not behave.

The inclusion of strong female characters within their novels, whose character arcs match by attempting to go against the societal norm, unites Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner. Both authors are attempting to cast light on what they perceive to be an unjust treatment of women. Faulkner disagrees with the notion of the sheltered and proper, non-autonomous Southern Woman, and Hardy disagrees with the dangerous stereotype of the fallen woman, which vilifies sexuality.

### **The Final Section**

A comparison between Faulkner and Hardy is trivial at most without considering why their similarities matter. Their similarities matter because they are both writing about modernist ideas arising during their periods. As previously mentioned, Hardy was not a modernist writer. However, rather he suffered from the ache of modernism which is described in David J. de Laura's paper "The Ache of Modernism' in Hardy's Later Novels." de Laura claims that,

“Hardy’s reaction to the new theology, closely related to emergent Modernism in the Roman Catholic Church, is significantly intense and contemptuous” (de Laura 386). The criticism of Christianity and the promotion of a pagan or archaic faith is predictive of modernist writers. Therefore, despite not being a modernist thinker, Hardy can be tied to Faulkner if one tracks the progression of positively affirmed concepts within their novels. Both write a novel in experimental form and include a dichotomy of old culture and a new culture, and both promote new and honorable roles for women. These modern ways of thinking are the binding agent in the comparison of the two authors.

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